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SUBJECT: GREEK MEDIA WELCOME PAROLED SPY STEVEN LALAS AS HERO

¶1. (U) Summary and Comment: A major news story over the weekend of November 24-25 in Greece, the return of former Foreign Service communicator and convicted spy Steven Lalas on Sunday afternoon was covered live on Greek television, and featured prominently in the evening's prime-time broadcasts. Met by Ministry of Justice officials as well as family and friends as he picked up his bags at the Athens airport, Lalas made a short, emotional statement expressing his relief at being reunited with his family after 14 years in the U.S. He was widely quoted as urging: "We [Greeks] should stand united, that's all I am asking for, because we are few." Lalas went immediately with his family to Kavala province in northern Greece, saying little else of substance in an "interview" en route carried on Monday in top-circulation, left-of-center Ta Nea.

¶2. (U) More in-depth coverage of Lalas' journey ran Monday night on SKAI TV's "New Files," a well-regarded Greek analog to "60 Minutes." A follow-up to a 2005 interview for the same investigative news program, Lalas repeatedly said of his crime that he would "do it all over again." The result of long-standing interest in the case by one of Greece's most prominent journalists, this report also featured an interview with an FBI Agent and Lalas' attorney. A print version appeared in influential, independent newspaper Kathimerini in both its Greek and English editions. Internationally, the matter received limited wire service coverage, with the International Herald Tribune, Pravda, and a few other European outlets picking up an AP dispatch, as did major Greek-American newspaper The National Herald/Ethnikos Kyrrix.

¶3. (SBU) Greek political figures have not so far engaged in the kind of triumphalism that might have been expected given the long history of this case. Lalas has been widely cast as a "patriot" and a "hero" in the media, with several mainstream newspapers criticizing the Greek state for failing to adequately protect and honor him, then or now. Embassy Athens has not been approached by any party to the matter or by the media since last Thursday's discussion with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman and the next day's coordination on a Ministry of Justice press release that acknowledged "close cooperation with U.S. officials" on Lalas' supervised return. Representative samples of Greek newspaper reporting and commentary follow. End Summary and Comment.

¶4. (U) Kathimerini (independent, influential) had extensive coverage, including this front-page Sunday, 11/25 headline in its Greek edition: "Steven Lalas: Greek Spy Returning from the U.S. Today." Virtually the same story appeared on an inside page of the English-language edition on 11/27, available at [www.ekathimerini.com](http://www.ekathimerini.com). It was written by the paper's editor-in-chief Alex Papahelas, also the senior figure on the "New Files" SKAI TV investigative program.

¶5. (U) The inside banner headline read: "Steven Lalas' Big Adventure. He Fought in Vietnam, Spied for His Homeland, Was Imprisoned, and Today, after 14 Years, is Seeing His Family Again."

The text reads in part: "It is well-known that people in serious countries exposed to national perils say that 'A country's reliability is gauged by the way it behaves toward a spy after his arrest.' Or, as Israelis would put it, 'each spy must be a prince/princess in his/her country.' The Greek state failed lamentably to protect the most valuable source it had had in the past few decades, for a number of reasons, such as incompetence and partisan favoritism through which the wrong people were assigned to the wrong jobs ... out of stupidity." [Ellipsis original.]

¶6. (U) Papahelas concludes: "What I have learned monitoring the Lalas case all these years is this: The first to hide when difficulties emerge are the self-proclaimed, insipid patriots who are willing to drag the country into an adventure and then hide, leaving the few, cool-headed professionals to take the chestnuts out of the fire. I have also found out that the core, most sensitive agencies of the Greek state became rotten after 1974. In 1977, the Greek state was still doing a good job, but in 1993 it mistook gendarmes for party-lords, and the Greek Intelligence Service for a political party branch. The last thing I have learned, and excuse my emotion, is that what Greeks of the diaspora have in their souls has nothing to do with the super-patriotic verbosity of the indigenous monkeys. It is a crazy love for a country that exists only in their minds, a patriotism that is exceptionally genuine without ulterior motives or self-promotion. Obviously, the Steven Lalas that I got to know paid for this patriotism. He will at last see his family again after 14 years ..." [Ellipsis original.]

¶7. (U) Top-circulation Ta Nea (left-of-center) ran a two-page story, tagged with this front-page secondary heading: "In Turkey there's a Bounty on My Head: Ta Nea's Interview with Lalas," a piece signed by Harry Karanikas. An inside carry-over is headlined: "Greece Does Not Support those who Supported Her," but the text attributes this quote to a friend of Lalas. The writer traveled with Lalas from the

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airport in Athens to Kavala in northern Greece and has a few quotes from Lalas that he presents to be an interview. In this story, Lalas comments indirectly on the reduction of mandatory Greek military service to 12 months, saying that the "Army is a useful thing."

¶8. (U) In addition, Ta Nea chief editor Notis Papadopoulos commented under the headline "They Owe Him" as follows: "The Lalas case is a shame for the Greek state. The probably one-off Greek spy who had been giving secret U.S. Pentagon and State Department documents to Greek governments ended up in an American prison through a blunder by a Greek official who nailed him -- wittingly or not -- to the American agencies. The Mitsotakis government, during whose tenure the arrest was made, not only left him alone and did not provide forensic support, but also left him alone to cover the huge expenses of the trial, and his wife helpless (she was pregnant then) with two young children. The Greek state demonstrated amateurism, incompetence, and callousness in the Lalas case. The least it could do for Lalas today is to recognize the services he offered. Whatever the cost. They owe him."

¶9. (U) Eleftheros Typos (centrist) carried a weekend story by diplomatic editor Angeliki Spanou under the headline: "The Spy who 'Paid the Piper' for the Macedonian Issue." It reads in part: "His fate was tough, considering that two Americans who were caught wearing ... wigs [ellipsis original] in a van in November 1993 at Amerikis Square were simply sent back home. ... Some people link Washington's belated clemency with the Greek-American vote, and some say the Bush Administration is making an effort to embellish the face of justice in the U.S. in view of the 2008 elections."

¶10. (U) Eleftherotypia (left-of-center) had this on the front-page: "'Spy' Welcomed as Hero." Inside headline: "Emotional Gathering for Lalas." The text reports that: "In TV interviews, Lalas said he was a victim of treason and denounced the politicians of that period (Mitsotakis's government) who played truant. 'We should stand united, that's all I am asking for, because we are few.'"

¶11. (U) Ethnos (left-of-center) noted: "[After his arrest, h]is wife, Maria Maidanou-Lalas, who was then 26 years old, was taken to

the U.S. Embassy building where she went through the 'polygraph test.' Since then she has been living at Chryssoupolis, in Kavala, where she started a private English-language school and raised her two children with great difficulty."

¶12. (U) Smaller-circulation Avriani (populist, independent) ran this front-page banner: "Stavros Lalas for Parliament. The Greek State, Political Parties, Church, and Greek People Should Publicly Recognize Sacrifice of Man Who Stayed in Prison in America for 14 Years." The paper's back-page lead commentary read in part: "Lalas is one of the last heroes. He was sold to Americans in an era when CIA agents used to maraud around in our country."

SPECKHARD